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ALIEN MAGIC

BY W. B. DRAYTON HENDERSON

APPARENTLY it is the law that whatever continues entirely without doubt may easily come to continue without belief also. Domestic magic stands as an example. It is firm beyond disparagement, being compact of all manner of tender mystery. Fire-light, and stair rails worn to the hands, and the look of morning and night from windows go to make it up; also the adventurousness of some hallways, rugs that seem bent on sliding into Arabian Nights journeys, and stable rugs that rest content in the memory of bold accomplishment, such as Kurds or Bokharas. Yet sometimes this domestic magic suffers for its constancy. In the winter of the eyes it lies a thin and pallid shadow that was once ardent with free or arrested light from its edges to its centre. And yet we know—in a sense we know—that it is shot through with glory; sure, but for our “averted faces,” that “the many splendored thing” remains, and “the drift of pinions would we hearken, beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.” But who is, after all, to better this—give strength to hands and fingers against all that clay stoppage, untwist that perverse neck, and blow mote and beam out of unseeing eyes?

It is here that Alien Magic stands for a recovery. It has an ethereal wind somewhere, sprung to earth anew from some august vocation among the stars, that would blow scales from the eyes were they as heavy as Lybra; mountain-cabbage palm or regal cotton-tree, boled columnar for such practice of disused muscle as would lead to the overthrow of all Philistia. And it has more, being not only the complement of the unwandering magic, but a system in itself, a kingdom of its own.

Status there is predetermined. So Stella Benson states in her last guide into one of its secret provinces, *Living Alone*. “All witches and wizards are born strangely and die violently. They are descended always from old mysterious breeds, from women

who wrought domestic magic and perished for its sake, and from men who wrought other magic among lost causes and wars without gain, and fell and died, still surprised, still interested with their faces among flowers." But it does not appear that fortune favors always as she says. During the war they did indeed die—with flowers that shared their last interest, Flanders poppies; poppies again by Afion-kara-hissar where they dragged themselves after the bitterness of Kut, or wild geraniums about Gaza and the field of Ascalon. But that was an exception, and its real truth hardly glimpsed as yet. There is a rumor that the general conduct is otherwise. They may fall, more likely among fallen tiare blossoms, or edelweiss, or in the shadow of that cascading Himalayan orchid, than amid the ordered gentleness of a nasturtium bed. But they need not die. Before Maundeville it was whispered that they were immortal.

One circumstance about them is, however, surer than this. They may be predetermined for the kingdom and live in it forever. But they do not blunder into it. They must know the ceremony of the sea. Perhaps it is not necessary that, having known, they should tell. But there is doubt if they can do otherwise: so much so that your sailor man who ships you and in twenty or thirty words or even sentences is at an end of the voyage, becomes at once suspect as to his authenticity. Such cannot be trusted to traffic in the least evanescent of the impalpable cargoes of Alien Magic. For the sea is their safeguard, and the first great way to their discovery. It is the beginning of the end of the old, and the forecourt, if not the very holiest place, of the new. Like sleep it knits up the ravelled sleeve of care. But first it may unravel, before it begins with dextrous fingers to reweave a new pattern. If it is given no chance to do this, if you try to reach the Siege Perilous by mere circumvention or neglect of the perils, you might as well bide at home. You will but pass over it to perpetrate some old sin of Rousseauism in some virgin land. Our countrymen have too often done this that it should be condoned. They continue to do it, and we have the latest American wanderer satisfying the national egoism once again by discovering after easy vigils that the great meaning of the wilderness is Ourselves. With a swarter sea he would have been weaned of

this curiosity; or with any touch of open sea at all. For the sea does not need to batter to pieces all remembered nights and days, as it so often does: meeting you head on at the very hands of your port of sail with battalions of moving hills, smoking summits, and unstable valleys of fear, setting cold unrest at work at the hollowing foundations of all your old delight, and sweeping from your last grasp even the immemorial peace of the settled stars. It can woo you into the kingdom as well, and heal you with waters smoother than Damascus'. I have seen it prepare an ordeal in the midst of calm; stretch arms of wonder almost to the very slip, and at the harbor's mouth, in exchange for the acrid contention of docks and the bewildering weight of heat sluiced down glittering gutters of dim mountains, raise up suddenly a loveliness that was rending and intolerable to leave. In its ordinary mood that island appealed as the most beautiful island in the world to the Tomlinson who gave up his soul in *The Sea and the Jungle* rich with every gift of Alien Magic. But this was no ordinary mood. The sea spread ecstatic sapphire to a shore of misty gold. Above were mountains steeped in purple shadows, and on the mountain top, tiptoe, in a fulgent vesture of cloud from the looms of the Trades, stood jocund day. The suddenness smote like an accolade. To see the beauty was to travel onward changed, if onward at all.

Whether accomplished by battery or by lure there is always this result, and the change is a new consciousness of the world. They begin to know their island when they begin to know beyond it. Also they begin to value its gardens when they have weeded spindrift from sea pastures, and its safety and reason when they have met unreason at flood and have recovered. For three years and more even the casual type of voyager might know this last, were it in no more than a smother of phosphoric wave, say off Bordeaux or Brest, making a beacon of his ship in an innocent sea where every wavehead seemed to hold a candle to disaster. But in general it is removed from the casual. He gives not so much as his eyes to ways when they grow perilous, and lies indifferent to disastrous or propitious stars, Ena and Algina even, marking in some lonely skies a sure entrance into desire. It is reserved for stouter hearts and for curious, perhaps even childlike

eyes. Only these are constantly open to the twofold craft of the sea, the simple animistic fancies it stirs up by its profuse strength, the need for definite and familiar things which it inflames by leaving it long unsatisfied. Only they can really conceive its magic. Possessed of them, you need not press beyond the Roaring Forties to know the first mystery. With the sea silent and marching under wind like a ruffling flag, you may still see the "filmy shapes of those things which darken the minds of the primitives," and perhaps you may be afraid. If you voyage further, you will see and feel more. Then, say in the Sixties, North or South, if you enter upon a realm long ago known to be populous with powers hostile to the constancy of man's mind, you begin to wonder what sense of law we should have learned had these been our teachers. Man is an intruder in that world. The natural forces at work are less mindful of him than are remotest mountains. His utmost effort is futile against them, and his senses daze beneath the play of their unrealities. Adventuring there is a desperation of the mind, as adventuring among Alps is a desperation of the body. Strange and multiple suns mock him, and the one he has learned to trust for so much regularity he may see rise and set and rise again in fewer minutes than it ordinarily takes hours. Shining cliffs of immense ice rise before him where no cliffs are, tender leads of open water invite where are only swart leagues of compacted floes, and over all the long Arctic night comes down, a bewildering half darkness that casts no shadows and forewarns of no pitfall or stumbling-block to those who trust it. Sir Ernest Shackleton records all this in his *South*, and also the effect of it upon men's minds, the fantastic shapes of snow and ice they come to see, hostile guardians of safety or of further danger. "People living under civilized conditions, surrounded by all the familiar work of their own hands, may scarcely realize how quickly the mind, influenced by the eyes, responds to the unusual and weaves about it curious imaginings, like the firelight fancies of our childhood days." Escape inevitably takes the name of deliverance. Safety is miraculous and golden—if it comes. So it was long ago with Hakluyt's men also. "Troubled with danger and continual fear of death," they found their exit at last to be a wonderful provision of God for

their necessities, and a benefit of "time" who, in the quaint humor of the narrative, "had made them more cunning and wise to seek strange remedies for strange kinds of dangers."

The gift of reverence is here very plainly acknowledged. It is a great gift. Along with it, however, must be noticed another. This is that benefit of time, doubtless a new device or set of sail, jib, flying-jib or the like, and the very practical magic of being able (as previously they had not been able) to work against the wind. With this is advanced, although humbly, the triumphing spirit of man. Shackleton's epic advances it even more dramatically, in scenes that the cosmic humor may well like to brood upon. The mote of vital dust is indifferent to the whirlwind; then it strokes the mane of the whirlwind and calls it good. In the midst of five days of unending storm breaking upon their open boat, one splendid pirate buys matches from his equally splendid chief at the rate of one bottle of champagne per match, to be paid (paradisa! faith!) when he should open a possible "pub" in the then most improbable future. There grows meanwhile a serene impersonal delight in the beauty of those enemies of delight: "drifting across the storm-whitened seas and watching with eyes interested rather than apprehensive (as their forbears' were 'still surprised, still interested') the uprearing masses of water flung to and fro by nature in the pride of her strength."

It will be remembered that after this, Shackleton and two others adventured for thirty-six hours over impassable mountains, glaciers and cliffs of immense ice. Mountains have their gift of magic at any time. In the Alps, even, beneath which men passed before Hannibal, and have adventured among them from Saussure, feeling himself lifted into surviving safety above the ruin of the common world, to Nettleship certain that death does not count, or the last of those other climbing British brought home beneath the square peace of the little church at Zermatt, men have received from them the gift of vision. But South Georgia was stranger. And the record, sustained independently by all three who prevailed against its fastnesses, is that "it seemed to me often that we were four, not three"; . . . "things intangible, but a record of our journeys would be incomplete without reference to a subject very near to our hearts." When that was

ended they knew more themselves. They had "suffered, starved, and triumphed, grovelled down, yet grasped at glory . . . grown bigger in the bigness of the whole. . . . They had reached the naked soul of man."

The growth is in relation to wonders and perils, to knowledge also of the large zest of the earth and vitality of living things, the battering charge of killer whales smashing through tons of broad ice, the survival with immense scars, of seals that had almost been their prey. But also it is in relation to simple and common things which reveal their exquisite significance come upon from these ways. They reveal it, admittedly, come upon from ways other than terrible: as water, for instance, "sweet water's dimpling laugh from tap or spring" heard in sudden court yards or unexpected forests; giving sudden tongue (as it once happened) from a hidden culvert between Tintern and Chepstow as it leapt into the peacefulness of Wye. . . . But such appeals, sacred as they are, in comparison seem almost trivial. These ears ill with the crunching of polar seas, and eyes blind with spindrift and lips black with thirst, offered a completer receptivity. So when courage brought the seekers to land, and the divine chance that waits upon extreme need gave them a coign of cliff to shelter, and essential water flowed singing to their need, it was, as they said, "a splendid moment." There could be no other word for it.

Perhaps there must always be some harsh contrast that such a moment may arrive. Cloud must be riven that light may fall beneficent. Pontus must thunder and Colchis darken about the fleece of gold. There must be lands *domibus negata* and far from the genial sun to love laughing Lalage. But even we may imagine the rapture, coming upon quiet places and unexpected beauty. It has been heard of on the lower Fifth itself where in a modest window opposite the Drab Sibyl, butterflies, "volatile flames," of Borneo and Madagascar and Brazil have fluttered into stillness, *Attacus Atlas*, *Sapilio Blumei*, *Urania Croesus*, in soft browns and blue blacks as gorgeous as flame. Such are, however, but the relic of dreams: the transportable fragment of Alien Magic, and to know that, these dreams, like the harsher polar ones, must be followed home. They are easier to follow than Borean

Aurora—though it is doubtful if you could get 5000 volunteers in a month or so to follow them as Shackleton did to his cause of White Warfare. But they have an even longer darkness, the twilight of trees, where there are even more terrible forces at work that have stirred more men and stirred men more into an acute awareness of the “inexhaustible riches” of nature, and of man’s integrated place in its general scheme than perhaps any other. They have opened up through their pathlessness innumerable paths into that informed pride and rapt humility which is the great gift of Alien Magic. They are the forces of the jungle.

The jungle is more approachable than the Poles. In tender moods it may seem even to invite men to rest upon its selvage. But in reality it is more hostile to man than anything on the Earth. It has the discrete personality of irreclaimable heath or moor through which the most that man can do is to make a path for his swift occasions. And in addition it has fierceness and venom as the mere by-products of its life. Mr. Tomlinson, to whose book I have already referred, has pictured it as no one else has done. His jungle is the greatest of all—Amazoniana, with its 30,000 miles of navigable waterways, a thousand miles and more from the sea rising or falling almost twice as many fathoms as “my father lies” at the dictates of remote Andean springs. It is a world that even fearfully reveals life. Its humus literally “stirs beneath your feet with the movement of spores and seeds.” “Its free fecundity has buried the earth everywhere under a wild growth nearly 200 feet deep.” He contemplates it from a viewpoint of accelerated time under whose very eyes these trees lift themselves up at summons of the sun, thwarting their less resolute kind, and lianas, writhing and constricting about them, “manifestly like serpents, throttle and eat their hosts.” Others have felt this similarly, if not so keenly, seeing sycophant fig winding about stalwart cedars, and epiphyte cereus or wild pine or orchid in the gloom of their battle or embrace, and starring the gloom: Nature’s last word after an endless duplication of effort; but that word music. The swift violence of life makes death a mere gesture of its change. In other jungles, more seasonably watered, it is hardly necessary to accelerate time to discern their swift growth. Witness that of the *Jungle Book* and the “white night”

in which Mowgli and all living things leap in the fervor of a Central Indian spring. "All green things seemed to have made a month's growth since the morning. The branch that was yellow leaved the day before dripped sap when Mowgli broke it." But there is more than a pleasant aspect to such lavish springs. They have desolations also. For the jungle is full of surprises. It yields a little, space or indulgence, and man celebrates a triumph. Then it descends upon him. It breathes out clouds of flying poisons from its swamps. It secretes a dread at his heart and persuades him of Powers of Darkness. So it is in Hudson's Patagonia. So in Malaya as Sir Hugh Clifford has made plain, evil takes place that does not cohere with light and has no fraternity with the sun. So in the Central Indian Highlands, in the days of Captain Forsyth's description, sal forests shed their seeds in millions, thus maintaining themselves against the blind destructiveness of Byga and Gond, and "the jungle, in terrible and unequal battle with the aborigines, vexes him with its immense and unremitting strength of vegetation and noxious wild beasts." ". . . Every now and then the heart of the Korku failed him, and he abandoned the contest." Hathi and Bagheera and Kaa and riotous creeping greenery occupy the field. Abler men have abandoned it elsewhere, with somewhat similar results, not counting those who abandoned it for the graveyards of Manaos,—whom Miss Eliot describes in her *Black Gold*,—or those of Mr. Tomlinson again, similarly circumstanced about Serpa or Port Velho. The drama of their going remains, so long as stone and stone cling together, accented by the proposed permanence of their stay. Sevilla d'Oro overcome (*on dit!*) by the unquenchable fire of "armies of innumerable ants," doubtless left such, tessellated pavements and carved marble and cathedral walls, for perhaps centuries. Boro Budur's carved hill temple in the elder world is islanded and hidden this millennium in a sea of leaves. As I write, comes a memorial of Prah Khan, in the heart of Cambodia, the floors and walls all but hidden blankly beneath vine and fern; gigantic fig blocking with columnar roots the great doorways and spreading vast tentacles among the loosening cyclopean ashlar. "People who are born in it, dependent upon jungle, are afraid of it." Miss Eliot says of her riverine Indians:

"They seem to be always conscious that its life is as active as theirs, and very much stronger. . . . A deceitful beauty! It enchants its lovers, but always devours them in the end if they do not run away. Foreigners always love it, and they who know it least are least afraid."

But the jungle practices more than this black magic, and has more gifts than the generous gift of fear. Dare its peril and it may certainly crown you with a sense of the radiant wonder of the earth. This is the penultimate gift of Alien Magic. It persuades you of a new caution and adds a golden hope to your tense distrust. You begin to feel you might go in search of asses and find a kingdom, or reach after a flower and inadvertently touch a star. For you may actually stoop to a dry twig, and, that learned, a green, and startle into new stillness one and another kind of mantis; or you may grasp an inviting rope such as might aid any Jack up a bean-stalk to all romance whatever, and discover—the thinness of the walls of Paradise and the tender adjacency of that old serpent. To your startled caution comes then amazing beauty, a butterfly, a paroquet, a trupial like a fallen flake of flame from a seraph's wing, humming-birds with ethereal wings "hanging adream." There are orchids also, spear-heads of light that stab the dark, and tongues of flame by no means "stammering of things unutterable." Those who feel that swift thrust and the immediate message of those burning words, are not likely to forget. They remember Beauty as supreme experience fashioned out of agonies and raptures; radiance amidst the awed stillness of sombre wings.

This jungle road of surprise and beauty is not, however, the only one that Alien Magic prepares. There are others, of knowledge and adventure, and of these the hunting road is the first, as it is the most difficult. Some few men, distinct from millions of cheap destroyers, have gone along it, far, since Nimrod walked there mightily before the Lord. Captain Forsyth, whose *The Highlands of Central India* has lately been reissued, was certainly one of these. Roosevelt, who was experienced, said that Forsyth's record was the best of any. The jungle must welcome such, for, being an unmodern woman, she thrives on mastery, and cannot but perceive that in his dealings with her this least hopeful of

all her sons has grown reasonably masterful since the far day when fire lured him from her sheltering trees. She can feel it now, even though she also has changed, and has put aside the harsh disciplines of his infancy, no longer opposing him with sabre-toothed tiger or mastadon. For he has mended his frailty, and taken her most constant strengths, and used them with the free assurance of a favored son, taming her elephants and making them projections of his own will, steadfast under tearing claw and fang. He possesses implicitly, and proves what she appears to offer with what she appears to withhold. He knows her signs and is equal to her shifts of mood. For him only the tiger "burns bright" and displays "fearful symmetry." He values its strength because he has measured it, and the speed of the black antelope and the glory of *Ovis Poli*. Nonetheless, he is not lost in amazement. For all his delight in life he becomes a master of death also, killing cleanly and not above his need, neither wasteful nor distrustful of Nature's abundance. He merges himself with her personality, without relaxing his own disciplines, vital to all its vitalism and economy; no less swift or cruel or tender. This, as Emerson says, is Brahma. He that slays is one with what he slays—and there is a gift of classic strength to his kind in the knowledge of this kinship.

Alien Magic, moving to virtue by revealing such strength, and to humility by such weakness, and to reverence by such startling beauty, moves also in other ways. It leads to peace. We are discontent with change, and it shows us the unchanging. We are perplexed with a divine nostalgia and a sense of the long way we have come from our true home. It leads us back by instant paths. In tender dawns it discovers the gesture of the new earth and winds blow to it that are fresh with the scents of original day. Now it opens up the desert and spaces free before to sun and stars, but to little else. So we begin to desire them and find such uses for many in them as Arabia had for St. Paul only, or Gobi for some few lesser saints—or (as Paul would have it) sinners. There is Hardy, delighting in Egdon or Scheveningen, and, before Hardy, Shelley's delight in all waste and solitary places, and Darwin expressing it for Patagonia, and now Hudson, whose *Idle Days in Patagonia* shows his "intense longing to visit this solitary

wilderness, resting far off in its primitive and desolate peace, untouched by man, . . . unmarred." In such places we are safe from contacts. No kaleidoscope of appearances blinds us of the truth, and no man stands between us and the light, or, with a penny candle, confuses us of the stars. Such freedom is, however, but half the tale. Men find not only peace, but integration, to which peace is the open door: beyond it they think to hear the essential music and to touch with their hands simple and perfect things fresh from the beginning of the world. Such was Hudson's dream bird which he desired to find. It was to be one as old on earth as the oldest, and in his dream where only he found it, it was always softly colored. His ultimate explanation of the power of these solitudes upon him was that they encouraged a return to an actual primitive mental condition—an intimacy with the native earth—long outgrown by the world. Somewhat similarly, Somerset Maugham, not unduly swayed by the unities of his story, pictures the spell of Tahiti as belonging to a channel in which life had come down unstopped and unstained from immemorial times; and Frederick O'Brien, in his *White Shadows in the South Seas*, conscious of this same heritage and of going back "across centuries of time," builds, partly on this foundation, his alluring picture of a fading Paradise and undivided childhood of our race. But the happy play and kinship with Nature of such pictures is no more than a detail and tolerable byway of Alien Magic. If it could not lead us except to a dying heaven, it would be of small service as a guide. We must have more than this limited sort of friendship with Nature.

Man must begin, know this, where Nature ends.

Nature and man can never be fast friends.

Fool, if thou canst not pass her, rest her slave.

Pleasure in Marquesan life is pleasure in a sort of engine-room slavery—a boy's pleasure in smooth life that turns with glimmer and singing. But it has no completeness in itself. Having learned its secrets, the inner secrets of the speeding earth, true adventurers therefore turn elsewhere. They must know not only the strength but the way of their ship. So like boys from the experience of bunker gloom, and engine's rhythm, or the solace of habitable decks where life goes on and the beauty of continuance, they turn

adventurously to some uplifted place. They seek out a bridge of lonely watch, or some remote masthead of space or time: to be the first in any new adventure, "that ever burst into that silent sea"—and have the gift fresh from the eternal hands; to be lifted up high above the common experience to which, as it were, stage after stage, ratlines and shrouds descend. To Saussure, first at the top of Mont Blanc, they descended out of sight: "I seemed to have survived the universe and to see its corpse at my feet." To Sven Hedin at Lake Manasorowar in Thibet, visibly they descended with the four great rivers that flow down from it to water a continent, and ascended in the hope and effort of centuries of pilgrimage.

When in such watchers memory is keen of the secrets of the earth, the ultimate gift of Alien Magic is bestowed. The world lies beneath them, and they apprise its definition, its strength and habit and burden, as a man may apprise the definition of a known ship, as proudly, as lovingly. Like Hardy or Vaughn Moody they feel it lift itself against the sea of space, and, like Tomlinson, conscious not only of its celestial magnitude, but trustful of the obscure port of its destination, lost just now in archipelagos of remote stars, they answer the cry, "The lights burn bright, sir!" sung them from any watch whatever, with a promise in the ear of space, "All Right." These are the ones whom Maundeville describes as immortal. They are fed on eternal things. That prow of our voyaging galleon of Tellus where they stand, he but sees in another light, calling it the mountain of Polombe. And there the well, fair and great, that changes its odors and its spices every hour of the day diversely, is but the magical draught of the known earth's virtue. Who drinks of it fasting is made whole. They that dwell there and drink often are always young. "Some clepe it the well of youth. . . . And men say that that well cometh out of Paradise."

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